

The Faith and Dr Gilbert Murray

John Crozier

Dr Gilbert Murray (1866—1957), one of the most distinguished academics of his time, was well known for his incisive criticisms of Christianity. His reconciliation to the Catholic Church shortly before his death stirred up quite a lot of controversy and the truth of it was even questioned. Canon John Crozier, who ministered to Murray during those weeks, feels he can now write a full account of how it happened.

The Aquinas Lecture at Blackfriars, Oxford, on 'Worship and Theology', was delivered by the Revd. Dr Maurice Wiles, the Regius Professor of Divinity in the University. In the course of it he touched on the agnostic's prayer, so movingly described by Dr Anthony Kenny in his book *The God of the Philosophers*. Dr Kenny had written:

There is no reason why someone who is in doubt about the existence of God should not pray for help and guidance on this topic as on other matters. Some find something comic in the idea of an agnostic praying to a God whose existence he doubts. It is no more unreasonable than the act of a man adrift on the ocean, trapped in a cave, or stranded on a mountainside, who cries for help though he may never be heard or fires a signal which may never be seen. Such prayer seems rational whether or not there is a God: whether, if there is a God, it is pleasing to him or conducive to salvation is quite another question. Religious people, no doubt, will have their own view about that. But if there is a God, then surely prayer for enlightenment about his existence and nature cannot be less pleasing to him than the attitude of a man who takes no interest in a question so important, or in a question so difficult, who would not welcome assistance beyond human powers.

This lecture and quotation have prompted these reflections written here, which in fact meet a request made to me in 1967 by Rosalind Toynbee that sometime I would write a coordinated account of my ministry to her father, Gilbert Murray, at the end of his life.

In mid-summer 1956, when making my pastoral visits on Boars Hill, close to Oxford, I used to pass the time of day with an elderly gentleman taking his daily walk. One day our paths converged. He opened the conversation: 'I understand you are the Catholic priest in this area. May

I introduce myself. I am Dr Gilbert Murray.'

I told him I was parish priest of the Hinksey Catholic parish.

'You are a Scot,' he remarked.

'I was born and bred in Glasgow,' I told him.

That began reminiscences—he talked about the Glasgow he knew during his years as Professor of Greek in the University there—and when we reached the gate of his home, Yatscombe, he said: 'We must meet again. Propose yourself for tea at your convenience.' His gentle courtesy, engaging conversation, and cultured voice left a deep impression on my mind.

At the beginning of September his wife, Lady Mary, was very ill, His daughter, Rosalind, came into the sacristy as I was preparing to celebrate Sunday Mass. She introduced herself and said: 'I understand you have met my father. My mother is seriously ill; could you pray for her?'

I agreed, and asked her to give my kind regards to her father. After Lady Mary's funeral, Rosalind and her father went for a walk. As they passed the chapel she told him I had prayed for Lady Mary. She told me her father stopped, looked at her and said: 'Why didn't you tell me this before?'

That evening, after Rosalind left Yatscombe for the North, Murray telephoned me and asked me to come and see him.

When I did, he thanked me for my prayers. Death was uppermost in his mind. He told me he had been married for 67 years. I replied that, from my pastoral experience, even when the illness was terminal and the next of kin were prepared for the end, nevertheless the moment of death was always a wrench. He said he experienced this when his two sons died, and when his daughter Agnes died it had haunted him for a long time. I felt deeply sorry for him, and took my leave. He said: 'Come again soon.'

Murray, who was born in Sydney on 2 January 1866, had been baptised in the Catholic College at Sydney University. In fact, when, in 1877, after his father's death, his mother, Lady Agnes Murray, decided to return with 11-year old Gilbert to her native England, they called on the way at Rome and Pius IX gave him his blessing at the papal audience. But in England he abandoned the Catholic religion when still a boy, and as a young man he became known as a keen president of the Rationalist Press Association. Naturally, he did not bring his daughter Rosalind up to be a Christian—when she eventually made her way to the Church she published *The Good Pagan's Failure*, a critique of her father's humanism.

When next I called Murray was much concerned about the aftermath of the Suez crisis. I said that I hoped the trouble in the Middle East would clear soon as I had arranged to go on a pilgrimage to the Holy Land in July. He reflected; then said: 'I was with Asquith the night the Balfour Declaration was published. He read it and said: "we are in

for an infinitude of trouble.” ’

I did not see him again until the New Year. When I called on 31 January he asked me if I had been reading anything interesting over the holiday period. I said I was absorbed in *Le Phénomène Humain* by the anthropologist Pierre Teilhard de Chardin. He replied with a quotation from Sophocles’ *Antigone*: The phenomenon of man—‘wonders are many but none there be so strange to fell the child of man’.

I then asked him: ‘What is your philosophy of life?’

He looked out of the window. There was a long pause; then he replied: ‘There is some great power behind the universe ... of course, it’s beyond the mind of man.’

I said: ‘Well, to a certain extent that’s the teaching of the Church.’

‘Oh, no,’ answered Murray, ‘The teaching of the Church is clear-cut, in black and white.’

I replied: ‘Do you mean St Thomas’s articles? If so, we must note all Aquinas’s teaching is in the apostolic tradition. The Apostles found it impossible to state the divine mysteries in human words. There is a definition of the Vatican Council of 1870 which puts it very clearly. I cannot recall the exact words, but the gist of the declaration is that even when we receive knowledge by Divine revelation, we perceive it in a dark manner.’

As we left his study he said he would like to hear the full definition.

On 22 March Rosalind telephoned from Yatscombe and said her father invited me to afternoon tea. At table were also his secretary and two ladies. I was asked to say the Grace. After tea Murray, Rosalind and I continued talking in the library. He asked me if I had the Vatican definition. I had written a translation of it on the back of an envelope, so I read it to him. He then walked to his desk and asked me to dictate it to him. I said I would be passing the following morning, and, if it were more convenient, I could hand in the Latin book of definitions and perhaps another book to put that definition in context. He said he would be very pleased and so, next morning, I handed in the *Enchiridion Symbolorum, Definitionum et Declarationum de rebus fidei et morum* (better known as ‘Denziger’) and also F.J. Sheed’s *Theology and Sanity*.

The text I dictated comes from chapter 4 of the First Vatican Council’s Dogmatic Constitution *Dei Filius*:

The divine mysteries by their own nature so far transcend the created intelligence that even when delivered by revelation and received by faith they remain covered with the veil of faith itself and shrouded in a certain degree of darkness so long as we are pilgrims in this mortal life, not yet with God.

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In *Gilbert Murray: a Life*, published in 1984, Francis West writes:

In 1944 he was telling Rose Macaulay that people did not understand when he talked of a mystery, ‘something beyond our grasp we simply do not know and must not dogmatize’.

He made the same point in a letter to Bertrand Russell in 1954: What I wrote about beauty, physical and moral, was I think based on a sort of faith, that is, on a strong consciousness that beyond the realm of our knowledge there was a wide region in which we have imperfect intimations or guesses or hopes... The myth is mostly invented, but the faith at the back of it has at least a good deal of probability about it... It is in some ways the most interesting part of life, the great region in which you must be agnostic but nevertheless you have something like conviction.

Towards the end of his life Rosalind heard her father say: 'We radicals, I think, were much too drastic and made mistakes. We used to think we could keep the essence of Christianity while discarding the dogma. Now I think we are mistaken.' In that period she noticed in him a greater sympathy and understanding for organized religion. At times he expressed wishes for Catholic contacts.

About 2.00 p.m. on 17 April Rosalind telephoned me from Yatscombe. She said: 'The opinion of the doctor is my father will not last the night. Is there anything you can do for him?'

I replied: 'I will pray for him, I could perhaps give him a blessing. Since he is asleep, there is no hurry about the whole matter, don't wake him up. If he'd like me to come and see him, I will do so.'

I had to make up my mind in case he wanted me to see him. 'It is appointed to man to die once, to die and after that the judgment ...' (Heb. 9:27). This moment has its sacrament, whose authority in scripture is in James:

Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord; and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up; and if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven. (5:14)

in *The Teaching of the Church* Fr. Herbert McCabe OP has recently written of this sacrament's significance:

The mystery of grace signified and brought about in the Anointing of the Sick is the renewal of the life of the Spirit so that the recipient, whether in recovery or in dying, may be united more closely with Christ, our healer, and be a sign of love to the world. (n. 127)

At five o'clock Rosalind rang me to say her father was perfectly wakened and would like to see me. I said there were two questions which the 1917 Code of Canon Law required me to put in a situation like this. Firstly, had he left instructions to be cremated? Rosalind replied that the Will had not been opened. Secondly, was he a member of the Masonic Order? She replied that he abhorred all secret societies.

When I arrived at Yatscombe I found Murray upright in bed. He clasped my hand. I said: 'I understand you are seriously ill; would you

like to receive the Sacrament and Blessing of the Church in which you were baptised?’

Still holding my hand firmly he replied, clearly and deliberately: ‘Yes.’ Rosalind withdrew to the far corner of the room and I administered Extreme Unction and the Apostolic Blessing.

His life ebbed away very slowly. After about a month, on 20 May 1957, I received a call at three in the morning from Rosalind to say her father was dying, and I went to Yatscombe. Rosalind and I knelt and recited the Prayers for the Dying.

The funeral notice made it clear that the service at the Oxford Crematorium was for the family only. That evening I received an invitation to a Requiem Mass to be celebrated next morning in Campion Hall by the Master, Fr Thomas Corbishley, SJ. The congregation simply consisted of the Catholic members of the family and friends. The ashes were taken to Lanercost Priory, a church associated with the Carlisle and Murray families, where an Anglican Memorial Service was held on 27 May. The Oxford service was in the University Church on 5 June.

The Dean and Chapter of Westminster Abbey consented to a request by the United Nations Association for Murray’s ashes to be interred in the Abbey. When two thousand invitations to the ceremony of 5 July were sent out in the third week in June, the *Sunday Despatch* rang me and asked if it were true that I had received Murray back into the Catholic Church. I asked who their source was, but the reporter refused to divulge it. I pleaded in vain that the story might be held back until after the Abbey interment.

The story was published on 22 June and the media took it up. This issued in conflicting reports and a bitter controversy, due in part to the fact that Rosalind had not communicated my ministry to some members of the family. *The Daily Telegraph* reported that Rosalind now had had to talk about it with her barrister brother Mr Stephen Murray (who was not, of course, a Roman Catholic), but that he had eventually said: ‘From what my sister has told me, it appears that the priest in his relations with my father, and acting according to his lights, was fully justified.’

Rather different was the mischievous report in the *Manchester Guardian* of 25 June: ‘Murray was visited ... by a Roman Catholic priest ... The occasion was tea. After discussing some trivia the priest asked Murray two questions: “Would you like to have the blessing of the Church into which you were baptised?” and ... “Do you truly repent of your sins?” In each case Murray replied “Yes”.’ Even ten years later, in Sir Maurice Bowra’s *Memoirs*, the story was still being circulated that Murray had only agreed to receive a blessing, and a lighthearted remark Murray had made some months earlier was still being quoted as though he had made it after the blessing and as if it were his last word on the Church.

In a letter of mine which appeared in *The Daily Telegraph* on the 192

day of the Abbey service I tried to answer the criticisms. Regarding Murray's assent to the Vatican definition, I said I had no reason to believe it was other than 'real', not 'notional', and that from my past pastoral experience I knew that he 'was sufficiently in possession of his faculties to know what I was doing and what he was receiving.' Why, then, had he not spoken about it to his relatives? I wrote:

The reception of this sacrament by a lapsed Roman Catholic restores him to full membership of the Church. The objective efficacy of this sacrament, like that of Baptism, which must precede it, operates by the power of the completed sacramental rite. There is no need for the recipient to remember or refer to it, and Mr Murray assures us that his father never did.

The two ultimate realities in this matter are God and the soul. The relation between them is sacrosanct, and a third party must remain a stranger to this knowledge until the recipient volunteers to impart it.

This was not a case in which a lapsed Catholic in full health came to make a public reconciliation with the Church, but rather the case of the Church going privately to help a son in his journey into eternity.

When the press descended on the Dean of Westminster, Dr Don said: 'I gave permission for the interment of Dr Murray's ashes in the Abbey on the ground of his most distinguished services to scholarship and international relations. As far as I am concerned, the arrangement stands. Far from resenting Dr Murray's return to the Catholic Church, I am delighted to hear he died a Christian.'